

Transformative TV

You can leave it to South Africans to combine popular media trends with long-term development needs – and make it a success. Last year, the first reality makeover TV show on social development, Kwanda, drew over two million viewers. Gavin Andersson, one of the executive producers of the show, talks about the challenges of making good television out of community development and good community development out of television.



Kwanda / Kelebogile Motshwane

Gavin Andersson is director of the Seriti Institute, a professional training and coaching organization based in the Johannesburg area in South Africa, whose mission is to strengthen community organization for social health and local economic development. He was previously coordinator at the Co-operation for Research Development and Education in Botswana and programme director at the Leadership Regional Network for Southern Africa. He co-created Kwanda, a reality TV show on community transformation. Kwanda is a collaborative effort between the Soul City Institute, the Department of Social Development and the South African Broadcasting Corporation. Interview by **Jacob Boersema**.

A TV reality makeover show on community transformation. That must have initially raised eyebrows. Whose idea was it?

The lead organization is Soul City, which is an innovative development communications outfit with a lot of experience in using popular media to get social messages across. Today, you would call their activities edutainment or social marketing. Soul City has had a very successful TV soap running for many years covering different social topics. They realized that their viewers are increasingly into reality TV and decided to start a reality TV show on community transformation. It was a novel idea, but it caught on.

Kwanda means ‘growth’ or ‘development’ in the Nguni languages. What is the idea behind the series from a development perspective?

Since democracy was introduced in South Africa in 1994, more and more people have tended to sit back and wait for the government to deliver. A lot of community initiatives from the anti-apartheid struggle have dissipated. People think: ‘Now that we finally have our government, it will give us everything we need.’ We hoped that the series would help them realize that they need to organize themselves in order to improve their communities and help the government deliver.

The slogan of the reality TV series is ‘Making your communities look better, work better and feel better.’ How does TV achieve that?

The problem is you can’t just say to communities: ‘Okay, all of you, let’s see what you can do’ without giving them any means to get started. Our institute agreed with Soul City that they should create a Kwanda Learning Camp before we started filming.

In this camp, teams from all the different communities spent a month together learning how to organize and become self-supporting. We provided food for three days, and after that they had to feed themselves. They had to form their own enterprise and tender for work at market rates.

This work involved tackling community issues such as the problems of orphans and vulnerable children, HIV-Aids, alcohol abuse and economic livelihood. We designed work

opportunities for them, like creating a chicken farm or planting fruit trees, and also provided the tools and equipment. For the first time in their lives, they had everything they needed to work and earn money. The only constraint was their organizational ability.

Most people who attended the learning camp had never met before. The first days and weeks were very intense. People made mistakes and immediately felt the consequences.

The first thing people tend to do is elect a committee, which will manage the enterprise. But then they create different work teams, which the committee members are not part of.

So you may have a dozen different work teams, such as a crèche team, a kitchen team, a landscaping team, a team building the chicken farm and a team fixing the sport facilities. But since the committee members are not part of these teams, it's hard for them to understand what each team needs structurally.

The Learning Camp helped people understand that it makes much more sense for each team to have a coordinator who liaises with the committee. This creates a horizontal management structure that works much better than a classical or vertical organization.

Kwanda is unique in South Africa because it attracted TV viewers from across the income spectrum. Middle-class people thought it was amazing. What explains this success?

The first thing is that viewers witness some of the terrible conditions people live in. It is something many South Africans did not really appreciate – until the reality show actually took them inside these little shacks.

The question of how leadership works also made for fascinating TV, although it often dealt with painful situations. People make mistakes. In one place, two people stole money from the team and suddenly the group was faced with this theft, which played out in front of the viewers. They forgave this one fellow. It was very emotional TV.

In another community, the group had an authoritarian leader they could not get rid of. He frustrated all the efforts of a group of young women by using this sheer patriarchal power. It was very disturbing to watch, and yet that happens in many communities.

You have been working in community development for 20 years. Did the series raise new questions that research could help answer?

The most dramatic issues that it raised were about citizens interacting with local government: when and why it works and when it does not. In the series, the camera works as an accountability mechanism. When a local councillor threatens to push people away, he sees himself the next week on national television.

An interesting research question is: how do communities hold local councillors accountable? One of the biggest challenges we have had from development practitioners during the series concerns structural poverty. Our research tried to discover what happens when people organize themselves. Are they able to get government support and improve their lives? Or is this an idyllic view? Does the presence of TV cameras create a false reality?

From our perspective, we were not trying to suggest that it is easy to deal with the effects of poverty or propose a 'band aid' approach to it. But we were certainly exploring the extent to which people's agency can make a difference.

Earlier this year, there were riots in various townships, including one that was in the same municipality as a Kwanda community. The township went up in flames, people protested about bad service delivery and a corrupt local government. But in the Kwanda community people were organizing, getting whatever was needed and making things work.

It showed us that popular organization can have an immediate effect. You start to see a connection between citizens' attitudes to local government and how that alters a government's ability to deliver. But there are other issues too. The series shows how problems that people face are connected. This challenges many existing approaches by NGOs and government departments, who focus on single issues.

One question then arising from Kwanda is how different departments – and also NGOs – work together, and what is the degree to which this is led by citizen planning? How does integrated development planning and activity happen? How does civic-driven change occur? These are the questions that we, and other researchers, should be looking into. ■